

Sentient

by fickleminder

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Summary: A lonely Jack buys a homundroid â€“ a personalized android that serves and protects its master â€“ as a companion and names it Hiccup. He learns that Hiccup has a rare defect which allows it to think for itself and experience emotions, but it's just a machine. Machines don't do sarcasm and they can't feel loveâ€¦ right? Robot AU. Hijack.

1. Prologue

****Author's Note**:** Inspired by Chobits, even though I have never actually read the manga or watched the anime. I only have a general idea of what's going on in that series, but I still thought it was pretty interesting :)

And holy crap, while working on this, Tumblr suddenly decides to spring all these lovely Robot AU fanart on me. Talk about timing, I tell you. I did look at an outline of the AU written by Tumblr user hicstreme (who I believe is the person who started this wonderful thing), and I guess it's safe to say that my take on it is distinctly different. Still, hicstreme's ideas are really awesome, as are all the fanart, so go check them out!

I doubt this story could ever hold a candle to 'Imprint', a tragically beautiful piece in the Robot AU written by Tumblr user Spacey (which you should definitely read armed with a box of tissues or a pillow), but please enjoy :)

****Disclaimer**:** I do not own Rise of the Guardians or How to Train Your Dragon.

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><p>Sentient

Prologue

Friday evenings were often spent in the park.

It was a place where there was no shortage of children running around and near unlimited potential for fun to be had. Without fail, at the end of almost every week, he would stop by after leaving the center and head towards his usual bench, passing the time people-watching and basking in the sounds of nature and laughter being weaved into a melody of life.

And to think that after five hard days of work, most might assume that a daycare worker would be glad to retire to his home for two blissful days of peace and quiet.

Don't get him wrong, he loved the weekend, he really did. But sometimes his apartment felt a little too empty for its lone occupant and he found himself gravitating towards the park to stave off the solitude. He would watch the children play games, smile wistfully at couples spending time together, admire the tranquil yet lively scenery, and generally stay outside for as long as the sun allowed, trying to hold back the hollow feeling that would inevitably envelop him when he returned home.

But as was to be expected, the park eventually grew quieter with the darkening sky, indicating that his time was up. Having prolonged his week for as long as he could, he would then slowly trudge back to his apartment, melancholy heavy in his steps.

It took months of thought and careful planning before one Friday evening finally saw Jack standing in front of a particular shop. Recently, he had found himself eyeing its displays after walking past them every day on his way to work. The sign on the front, '_Santoff Workshop and Repairs'_, stared back at him passively. Taking in a deep breath, he pushed the door open and stepped inside, eliciting a jingle of bells from above the doorway.

"Welcome to my workshop! How can I help you today?"

Jack's head turned towards the source of the Russian accented voice and he saw a large man smiling kindly at him from behind the glass counter. The long white beard and prosperous figure in red attire reminded him of Santa Claus, but the heavily tattooed arms quickly put a stop to that notion. Unlessâ€¦ wait, was that 'Naughty' and 'Nice' inked on each arm?

Clearing his throat awkwardly after a moment of staring, Jack returned his focus to the task at hand. "Hi, I'm here to buy a homundroid."

"First time?" the man asked, earning a nod. "Well then! Let's get started!" Clapping his hands with the cheerful exclamation, he stepped out and ushered Jack towards the shelves at the side of the shop.

North (or so his nametag read) started by introducing him to the newer models, pointing out the latest homundroids that had just been delivered earlier in the month. Jack was asked if he had any preferences, like gender and special capabilities, to which he shrugged indifferently and shook his head.

Homundroid technology was relatively new, having been developed in the past few decades. The rapidly growing market had spurred a whole new frontier of design and innovation, producing generation after generation of homundroids within the span of several years. Each and every fresh batch from the assembly line came with newer designs, increased functionality and smoother operations, or so the countless advertisements claimed. Homundroids were moderately priced and not that expensive to maintain, so it was rare to go into town without seeing at least five out on the streets with their owners along the way.

A flash of black caught Jack's attention just as he was led towards the section housing the more popular models. He paused in his step and turned around, spotting a dark wing sticking out of something covered with a dirty white sheet, tucked into a corner. Curious, he left the still-talking North and approached the mysterious object, reaching forward to pull away the cloth when he got close enough.

So far, none of the homundroids he had seen really stood out or perked his interest, but thisâ€œ! Thisâ€œ! Jack couldn't help but let out an impressed whistle at the sight before him.

The homundroid looked to be a young man in his late twenties, no more than a few years Jack's junior. It had shaggy auburn hair and a youthful face dotted with countless freckles, and it was dressed in brown pants and a long-sleeved green tunic. A set of black leather shoulder pads covered the top half of its torso like a piece of armor, and there was a pair of black draconic wings and a long reptilian tail sticking out of its back. From the knees down, its legs had been replaced with scaly black limbs just like its forearms, which consisted of large black paws with sharp claws protruding out at the tips. Gingerly turning over its arms, Jack discovered that the underside of each paw contained a circular opening where a distinctively human (and freckled) hand could be seen.

Another thing that had resulted from the flourishing market for homundroids was the flood of customization services. It was no surprise that people wanted to personalize their own homundroids, seeing as they all looked identical when they were first purchased. Customization not only allowed for easier recognition, but it also improved aesthetic appeal, giving homundroids a more life-like appearance.

"I found this one outside."

Jack jumped at the sudden voice behind him and spun around to see North standing a few feet away, staring sadly at the homundroid he had been admiring just moments ago.

"What do you mean, 'found'?" Jack tilted his head in confusion.

"He was abandoned. His owner left him at doorstep and never came back," North explained with a frown. "I fixed him up and reset his systems, but he is old model, not very common nowadays. He's been sitting on my shelves for long time, no one wants him because he looks funny. Also probably not much use with allâ€œ! this." He gestured towards the homundroid's cumbersome limbs and the awkward appendages on its back.

Its previous owner must have had a dragon fetish or something, Jack

thought as he gave the homundroid another cursory once over. The customization made it look somewhat like an anthropomorphic black dragon, though it was clearly more human than reptile. It seemed perfectly fine to him, but he could see how others might find it weird or unappealing.

"What are you going to do with it?" he asked.

North shrugged helplessly. "Recycle, most likely. Some people will come down to clear out old models tomorrow. Too bad, I worked hard to patch him up," he sighed, shaking his head before making to lead Jack towards another aisle.

But for some reason, Jack couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from the homundroid in front of him. A piece of his heart went out to the poor machine, realizing that it would most likely end up in a pile of scrap metal by the end of the week, and he recognized the surge of sentiment as sympathy. Despite feeling a little foolish for pitying an inanimate object, there was just something about its loneliness that hit close to homeâ€|

"Would you like to have him?"

Jack stiffened and turned to face North, who was watching him with a knowing look on his face. Clearly the older man had noticed his hesitation and caught him mulling over his thoughts, so it was no surprise that he had arrived at that particular conclusion.

"Normally I recommend the newer models, but something tells me he'll be good for you," he grinned, patting his belly in affirmation. Jack raised a brow at the strange action, but he didn't dwell on it as he took a moment to consider the offer seriously.

Finally, he looked up and nodded with a smile.

* * *

><p>After taking one last look at the hand-written (and 'idiot-proof', he'd been assured) manual that North had given him, Jack carefully closed up the control panel located under the wing joints of his new homundroid. He had been adjusting the settings in preparation of its activation, and according to the instructions, the first step was to register his voice by talking to it.</p>

Where it stood in the middle of his living room, the homundroid reached up to just under Jack's full height. Getting up from the arm of the sofa, Jack crossed his fingers as he moved in front of the homundroid and reached behind it to press the small button at the nape of its neck.

Nothing happened in the first few seconds, and Jack felt his shoulders sag in disappointment as the anticipation deflated. But then he heard a faint hum of machinery as the homundroid's wings and tail began to twitch, and upon closer inspection, he could see the fingers inside the black paws flex experimentally. Jack bit back a small gasp when its eyelids slid open, revealing bright green optics staring directly at him.

The homundroid looked so _alive_, and if he hadn't known any better,

he'd say there was an actual human being standing in front of him right there.

"H-Hello? Can you hear me?"

There was a pause, and then Jack held his breath when the homundroid's mouth began to open. He leaned forward excitedly, expecting the pre-recorded confirmation message that his vocal imprint had been successful.

hiccup

Jack blinked.

Green eyes blinked back.

hiccup

If possible, the homundroid actually looked mortified as it slapped its hands over its mouth, muffling the next hiccup that shook its shoulders.

The thought that immediately popped into Jack's mind was just how cute the homundroid looked at the moment, but it was quickly pushed aside as he scrambled for the manual, fumbling through the pages for a clue as to how to fix the malfunction.

After flipping a few switches and re-crossing several wires (apparently he'd missed a paragraph of instructions under the Setup section), he tried talking to the homundroid again. A bright smile lit up his face when it finally lowered its hands and said, "Vocal imprint completed."

Jack laughed with delight, pumping a fist in success. "You're amazing!" he marveled, unable to stop grinning.

"Would you like to change your default designation?"

"Yes." All homundroids were programmed to address their owners as 'Master', but their initial startup came with the option to reset that.

"Please input your preferred designation."

"Jack."

"Default designation overridden. Please input my name."

Uh oh. Jack scratched his head, realizing that the thought had completely slipped his mind amidst all the excitement. Let's see... What do you look like... Chris? Jay? Henry?

The adorable image of the homundroid attempting to cover up its unexpected case of the hiccups suddenly surfaced in his mind, and then Jack was struck with the perfect solution.

"Hiccup," he decided with a smirk.

"Name registration completed. Jack, what is your command?"

* * *

><p>Author's Note: If anyone's curious, the term 'homundroid' was the result of mixing 'homunculus' with 'android'.

2. Part 1

Author's Note: So sorry for the long wait. I was originally planning to post this fic all in one go (prologue + 2 parts + epilogue), but I figured the length would be pretty overwhelming. Therefore, a total of 4 chapters it is. Here's the next installment: Part 1 :)

Please enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Rise of the Guardians or How to Train Your Dragon.

* * *

><p>Sentient

Part 1

Jack spent the weekend getting used to the second presence in his apartment. It felt really nice to finally have someone to talk to, even if that someone didn't necessarily talk back.

Homundroids were, for lack of a better description, basically servants. They did as they were told and nothing else. It was in their programming, and the only time they could react on their own was when their masters were ever put in physical danger.

Still, there were a few instances Jack had caught Hiccup on the verge of responding to him, only for the homundroid to hold itself back and snap its mouth shut when it realized just what it was about to do. He was undeterred though, and continued to chat despite the one-sidedness of the conversation. Hiccup's behavior was definitely not normal for a machine, but Jack wasn't complaining. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"Come on, Hiccup! Talk to me," he said with an encouraging smile. "Do I have to make it an order?"

"Is that a trick question?" Hiccup seemed to reply carefully, keeping its face blank and devoid of any emotion.

Jack rolled his eyes and sighed, watching as the homundroid wiped the tabletop with a damp rag after putting away the dirty dishes.
"Alright then, how about this: Tell me about your day."

"Jack showed how to cook and do housework," came the automatic response.

"And what did we learn from dessert?"

"Jack likes chocolate mint flavored ice-cream." Again, without missing a beat.

Grinning widely, Jack barked out a laugh at the deadpan tone. "There! Now that wasn't so hard, was it?" he chuckled. "And you don't have to be so formal all the time, you know. Loosen up a little!"

This time, Hiccup actually paused for a moment, as if to let the words sink in. Jack took the opportunity to drive his point home. "I mean it, Hiccup. I appreciate you listening to me when I ramble, but don't hesitate to join in too, okay?"

"Understood," the homundroid said quietly, a hint of a smile on its lips.

"Awesome!" Jack jumped up from his chair and grabbed Hiccup's arm, dragging it into the living room. "Let's go! The night's still young and the gaming console awaits!"

* * *

><p>Surprisingly enough, it was Hiccup who had doubts about following Jack to work despite the fact that it was in its code to stay close to him. The homundroid said nothing about the matter and remained silent as they walked to the daycare center on Monday morning, but Jack was somehow able to sense its discomfort from the way Hiccup moved stiffly behind him, keeping its eyes fixed firmly on the pavement.</p>

Its hesitation was understandable, of course. Who knew how the children would react to a homundroid who looked like a big fearsome dragon? Jack had called in beforehand and his colleagues had been a little wary at the news, but they had agreed to give Hiccup a chance before deciding whether it could continue to accompany Jack to the center.

Anna, Thomas and Rhonda were waiting at the entrance, eager the meet the homundroid that walked in after him. While Anna cooed about how 'cute' Hiccup was, the twins both agreed it looked 'badass', taking in Hiccup's claws and wings with open awe and admiration. But as much as they approved, it was the children's opinions that mattered, so they had to make sure the homundroid looked as unthreatening as possible. Anna suggested that it keep its claws retracted and flatten its wings against its back, and it was practically shrinking into itself by the time they finally deemed it okay to step into the room.

As it turned out, all the fuss had been unnecessary.

The children loved Hiccup. Jack was disappointed to tell them that the homundroid couldn't fly, but they insisted on going outside anyway and soon enough, they were happily taking turns to sit on its shoulders, pretending they were soaring through the skies as it flapped its wings. Ron and Tom (or 'Ruff' and 'Tuff', as they preferred to be called) played the evil villains that the 'dragon man' had to defeat, and the children gleefully ordered Hiccup to fire plasma blasts at them, shrieking with laughter when the twins clutched their chests dramatically and fell to the ground with a wail.

Hiccup also had a pretty impressive wingspan, Jack discovered when the homundroid was invited to a tea party after lunch. The sleek

appendages had a purple sheen under the sunlight, and they stretched far and wide over the excited group of children, providing them with some shade and relief from the afternoon heat. 'Tooth' (Anna was studying dentistry part-time, and the woman was simply obsessed with teeth) eagerly snapped photos with her smartphone when the poor homundroid was handed a cup of tea, giggling at the way it looked absolutely clueless as to what to do with it.

At the end of the day, everyone agreed that Hiccup was welcome to the center anytime, and Jack did a double take on the way home when he spotted the small braid one of the girls had managed to tuck behind the homundroid's right ear.

* * *

><p>Friday evenings had been officially declared 'Gaming Nights'.</p>

Jack owned a fairly impressive console along with a decent collection of games, most of which he had already beaten multiple times by himself. But now that Hiccup was here, he finally had another player to compete with. As a machine, Hiccup simply needed to be plugged into the system before it could start playing, and it could also operate on its own without needing to use a controller.

_ "Oh my god, Hic! For a computer, you suck at this!" _

_ "Because ramming other drivers off the track is the epitome of professionalism." _

_ "Sore loser." _

_ "Lousy trickster." _

_ Jack stuck out his tongue at the homundroid, smirking smugly. _

Slowly but surely, Jack noticed that Hiccup was beginning to loosen up. It had been reluctant at first, speaking formally and acting aloof, but Jack's persistence (which he refused to admit were bordering on childish and annoying antics) eventually managed to get Hiccup to crack. And when it did, Jack was treated to a whole new side of the homundroid.

Hiccup must have been encoded with a sarcastic personality program or something, because apparently it had been hiding quite the tongue. Instead of blank stares and emotionless expressions, Jack now received actual eye rolls, exasperated looks, and a daily (over?) dose of quick wit and sass.

_ Wheezing with laughter and giggling helplessly, Jack struggled to contain his guffaws while Hiccup stood in front of him, looking utterly unamused as colorful pieces of confetti on its body fluttered to the ground. _

_ "You are too kind," it muttered dryly, shaking its wings in an attempt to dislodge some of the tangled streamers hanging off them. _

_ "Looks like you got into a fight with a party and lost," Jack

sniggered before reaching forward to help remove the glitter and paper covering the homundroid. There had been a birthday celebration thrown by one of the children's parents at the center earlier that day, and Hiccup had accidentally gotten in the line of fire of several trigger happy kids armed with party poppers._

_ "I wonder whose fault that is."_

_ Jack waved a hand dismissively, innocently pretending that he hadn't been the one to instigate Operation: Decorate Hiccup by encouraging the kids to add a splash of color to the mostly black homundroid. Behind them, Anna was seeing the last of the children off while Ron and Tom were busy cleaning up the room._

_ "Times like these I find it hard to believe you're thirty and not three," Hiccup snorted as it lifted its arms to allow Jack to reach the pieces of metallic foil stuck on the undersides._

_ "What can I say? I'm young at heart," Jack grinned wickedly._

_ "And by 'young', I presume you mean 'immature, childish and juvenile'._

_ "I thought you weren't programmed to be a smartass?"_

_ "Now that's a surprise._

_ "What is?"_

_ "You. Thinking._

_ "Hey!"_

Once every month, Jack would book an appointment with North to have him do a checkup on Hiccup. Homundroids didn't exactly have an expiry date (they were simply replaced with newer models), but Jack was perfectly happy with his and wanted to make sure it was well maintained. North gave him tips on how to care for Hiccup, teaching him how to do simple tasks like keeping its joints well-oiled, removing rust, and updating its antivirus software.

_ "Your hair's really soft!" Jack exclaimed in surprise, gently smoothing down auburn locks with a comb. "Got any secrets you'd like to share?" he asked teasingly._

_ "Well," Hiccup drawled, "just keep bleaching it the way you do now. When it all falls out, wear a wig made of fine synthetic fibers._

_ Jack swatted the homundroid's arm good-naturedly in response. Putting away the comb, he picked up a duster and proceeded to clean its wings. "I'll have you know, it wasn't easy getting this shade of silver," he huffed, weaving his fingers through snow white strands. "And the ladies happen to love it. Makes me look senior," Jack flashed a cocky grin and struck a supermodel pose at the eye roll sent his way._

_ "More like senile._

_ "Oi, you calling me old?"_

_ "Ancient." _

Pouting, he bopped the homundroid on the head with the duster.

Yes, Hiccup was the best thing that had ever happened to him, and Jack wouldn't trade it for the world.

* * *

><p>There was a little boy named Sanderson who attended the daycare several years ago, when Jack had first started working there. He was quiet and reserved, but polite and well-behaved. The blond's favorite activity was playing in the sandbox near the garden outside the center, earning him the affectionate nickname 'Sandy'.</p>

Sandy's parents were often working abroad and their busy schedules left them hard-pressed to spend time with their son, let alone raise him. In their place, they bought a homundroid to see to his every need. Jack didn't know much about Sandy's home life or upbringing, but he did recognize the homundroid that walked the boy to and picked him up from the center regularly. As far as he could tell, 'Astrid' had been taking good care of him, keeping him safe and well-fed (if his slightly pudgy figure was anything to go by).

One incident involving Sandy and his homundroid stood out in particular, and that was when Anna had brought several jars of colored sand for the children to play with. There was plenty to go around even though the blond went wild that day, using up pads of drawing paper and bottles of glue to create many beautiful sand drawings. Most of Jack's colleagues agreed with him that the kid definitely had potential as an artist later in life.

When Astrid arrived later in the evening, Sandy had rushed up to it with a handful of his masterpieces and shoved them into its arms, eagerly pointing out what he'd been busy with all afternoon. Jack had been sweeping up some spilled sand nearby, and he was surprised to see the normally silent boy talking excitedly to his homundroid, flipping through his stack of sand-covered papers.

As he chatted away, Jack saw Astrid reach down to pet the boy's golden hair fondly, smiling like a proud mother, and it had been the first time he caught a glimpse of a very distinctively _human_ expression of love on a homundroid's face.

* * *

><p>A cool hand gently brushed sweaty white bangs away from his forehead, laying a neatly folded piece of damp cloth on the fevered skin.</p>

The soothing relief from the heat roused Jack from his fitful slumber and he cracked his eyes open, noticing that the curtains had been drawn to block out the harsh sunlight streaming through the window, enveloping his room in shade. Somewhere at the back of his hazy mind, it occurred to him that he should be getting ready for work, but a wave of dizziness washed over him when he tried to sit up, and he barely registered the firm hands on his shoulders steadyng him as he swayed weakly.

"H-Hiccup?" he rasped out, his throat feeling sticky and parched. The rim of a glass was pressed against his dry lips and he parted them gratefully, allowing the cool water to enter his mouth as he drank with thirst.

"I have notified the center of the reason for your absence," the homundroid said softly, carefully helping Jack back under the warm covers. "They send their well-wishes and have given you the next two days off to recover from your illness."

"Greatâ€|" Jack sighed, watching sleepily as Hiccup replaced the cloth that had dropped from his forehead. Falling sick (with a fever, no less â€“ he hated those) sucked, but being taken care of like this felt oddly nice. Though it was probably part of Hiccup's programming, he could almost sense an undercurrent of worry behind its actions. Still, despite knowing it was likely just his imagination, he let himself pretend that the homundroid was genuinely concerned about his health.

"How are you feeling?" And there it was again. But even if his addled mind was deceiving him, Jack soaked up the attention like desert sand in rain.

"Like crap," he groaned, shuffling deeper into the blankets. The heat was uncomfortable, but he fought the urge to kick the covers off, knowing that it wouldn't do him any good to let his body's temperature drop too much.

Hiccup's hand was slightly tentative as it petted his hair lightly. "Rest," it advised. "I will prepare medicine and something for you to eat when you wake up later."

Absently, Jack realized that Hiccup was tending to him without being told what to do. He reminded himself that it was probably acting according to its programming (falling sick was technically a physical danger to the human health, wasn't it?), but the thought still nagged at him for some reason. He let it go as the soothing motion of the homundroid's fingers carding through his white locks lulled him into drowsiness, and he closed his eyes with a content hum.

Something soft brushed against his cheek as the darkness behind his eyelids coaxed him back to the world of slumber, and although the sensation lasted only briefly, Jack felt his lips curl into a faint smile as he returned to sleep.

* * *

><p>"â€ near the outskirts of the city. If sighted, call the police immediately. Do not approach or confront this man under any circumstances. The local authorities are working with the FBI to apprehend this wanted terrorist, and everyone is advised to remain vigilant at all times.

_ "In other news, there has been a break-in near the south residential district where yet another homundroid was stolen last night. This marks the fourth case in three weeks, and despite the lack of evidence, there are claims that the thefts are targeted and not random acts of crime." _

"Jack, it is time to go."

"Hm?"

"You are going to be late."

"What time is ª Oh shit, I'm coming!"

It is speculated that the missing homundroids are part of a controversial group known as ª

* * *

><p>"Sentients?"</p>

Jack nodded as North paused in the middle of tuning Hiccup to look at him. "Yeah. I've heard that term being used quite a lot recently, especially with all the news about the missing homundroids. I was wondering if you could tell me more about it."

"There's not much to tell," North admitted, putting aside his tools to face Jack. "Also, there's no real proof that Sentients exist. Mostly rumors only."

"What kind of rumors?" Jack asked curiously, leaning forward in his seat.

"Rumors of a rare defect that allows homundroids to think for themselves and feel emotions. That spark of life that makes them more than just machines!" North began to gesture wildly with his arms. "It is a wondrous thing! But no one knows where it comes from. Out of hundreds of homundroids produced in assembly line, only a few are Sentients."

"Wait, so you're saying that they're alive?"

North shook his head. "Not quite. See, normal homundroids have to follow programming, yes? They have failsafe to make sure they cannot turn against masters. They must listen and do as told. But Sentients!" He clapped his hands in excitement. "Sentients have a bit more flexibility. They can question orders, talk back. I don't know if they still have to obey, but people say they are less inclined to if they refuse."

Jack took a few moments to process the information, sneaking a glance at the temporarily deactivated Hiccup. "How do you tell if a homundroid is a Sentient?"

"No one knows. Is grey area, lots of debate," North sighed. "Which makes it very sad."

"Why sad?"

"Because of abuse," the older man replied with a frown. "Homundroids are like slaves. They exist to serve humans and to protect us. But we don't always protect them."

A sickening feeling began to pool in Jack's gut and he turned to look at North with dread. "What do you mean?" he asked, even though some part of him already knew the answer.

"Some people use them for entertainment, for pleasure," was the blunt reply. There was no point in sugar-coating the ugly truth. "They cannot say no, so people think they can do whatever they like to them."

Jack was wide-eyed and speechless with horror. "That's -- that's --"

"Wrong?" North interrupted gently. "Are you so sure, Jack?"

"But --"

"Can they feel pain? Can they feel fear?" he continued, silencing Jack with his questions. "Are they only machines? Or are we dealing with living creatures? Even if they are Sentients, there is no proof. And if there is--!" His eyes darkened with sorrow and Jack swallowed hard, anticipating the worst. "Well, you know what some people do to keep things quiet. Permanently."

And that was all North was willing to share about the matter. He picked up his tools and returned his attention to Hiccup, leaving Jack to his thoughts.

The rest of the afternoon passed by in silence.

* * *

><p>Jack liked the cold, but this was just ridiculous.</p>

The heating system in the building he lived in had chosen the start of the winter season to quit on the tenants, and despite the landlord hiring repairmen to resolve the issue as soon as possible, they were told that it would take at least a week to get the heaters up and running again. Until then, they were advised to bundle up or simply move out and crash someplace else temporarily.

The second option wasn't available for Jack, so he found himself dressed in a hoodie and a pair of track pants, shivering under the covers and grumbling sourly under his breath. It was only the first night, but even he had to admit it was freezing, and he knew the temperature would only continue to drop over the next few days. He was seriously contemplating the idea of wearing his winter coat to sleep when a soft knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. Hiccup stepped in, carrying an extra set of blankets in its arms.

"Thanks Hic, you're a lifesaver!" Jack grinned and sat up, reaching out to pat the homundroid's arm in gratitude as it spread the blanket over him. His hand drew back in surprise when his fingers brushed against the scaly forearm. "You're so warm!" he exclaimed with astonishment. Was it the cold, or was Hiccup naturally like this?

The homundroid looked slightly flustered as it nodded. "My body generates approximately the same amount of heat as an average adult. It decreases when I power down for the night, to conserve energy," it explained.

"Oh, uh--! Good to know." Jack found himself looking away, suddenly unable to hold eye contact with Hiccup. Mentally, he chastised

himself for even thinking about asking the homundroid to warm up his bed. The idea feltâ€¢ Well, not wrong, but not right either. Hiccup was only a machine and it had to obey his orders, but was this considered crossing the line? The conversation he had with North weeks ago surfaced in his mind and he bit his lip hesitantly, unsure as to how to approach the delicate matter.

"Would youâ€¢ like me to sleep with you tonight?"

Jack could feel something crack at the rate he whipped his head to stare at Hiccup incredulously, clearly not expecting the homundroid to make the offer.

"If you are uncomfortable with the close proximity, I will remain at the edge of your bed to leave you with as much space as possible," Hiccup continued, shifting uneasily, and Jack noticed that the homundroid was also pointedly averting its gaze, choosing to stare at the wall instead.

He reasoned that Hiccup was giving its consent (not that they were going to have sex or anything, so calm down Jack stop overreacting) and besides, it would be just like two friends having a sleepover. The idea was tempting, and Jack really didn't want to wake up as a human icicle the next morning.

Silently, he pulled down a corner of the blanket and patted the empty space next to him, smiling shyly at the homundroid.

True to its word, Hiccup made sure to stay out of Jack's way, keeping its folded wings facing outwards and scooting as close to the edge as it could without falling off. The heat from its systems would be trapped under the blanket and transferred to Jack, allowing him to sleep comfortably.

It worked in theory, but then the homundroid observed that Jack was unconsciously burrowing his way through the double layer of blankets as he slept, his body slowly but surely inching its way towards the source of the warmth. Even if Hiccup got up and lay down on the opposite side of the bed when he got too close, the man would just change directions and repeat the process. The game could go on for hours, but Hiccup knew that moving around too much probably wasn't part of getting a good night's rest.

In the end, it settled for simply staying in the middle of the bed, allowing its master to curl into its body.

Jack let out a sigh of content as gentle arms wrapped around him and pulled him closer to a broad chest. He snuggled deeper into the warmth, faintly registering a dull hum of machinery from its source. The sound was soothing, and he felt so safe and protected. He didn't need to open his eyes to know that Hiccup was the one making him feel like this. Drifting at the edge of consciousness, he let himself be pulled back to sleep.

Their arrangement continued over the next week. Hiccup always left the bed before the other was due to rise, and Jack suspected that the homundroid didn't want him waking up to find himself being hugged like a pillow. He knew Hiccup had promised to keep its distance, but honestly Jack had to admit he rather preferred the close contact instead. Besides, judging by his own sleeping habits, he had most

likely been the one to move around first, leaving the homundroid no other choice than to remain where it was, and he made sure that Hiccup understood he was perfectly alright with it.

Then Jack received an email from his landlord one afternoon, informing him that the heaters had finally been fixed. The news left him with mixed feelings for some reason, and when Hiccup bade him goodnight hours later, he realized that his bed had never felt so big, or so empty. The heaters were running smoothly and he wasn't shivering at all, yet there was an inexplicable chill that seeped under his skin.

"Please stayâ€|" he whispered to the silent room, unheard, long after Hiccup had left and closed the door behind it. The homundroid was probably already in the living room, getting ready to power down and recharge for the night. Logically, Jack tried to convince himself that there was no reason for Hiccup to share his bed anymore. Despite knowing that he could always make it an order the homundroid could not refuse, he was unwilling to abuse the power he had, and it took an hour of tossing and turning before he finally fell into a restless sleep.

The next morning however, he found fresh paw-like footprints imprinted into the carpet just outside his door, next to a power socket in the wall.

Perhaps Hiccup hadn't been so far away after all.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: Thanks for reading! There's just one more part left before the epilogue, but I'd love to hear what you guys think of this so far :)

3. Part 2

Author's Note: Seriously guys, thanks so much for all your support with this story! I never expected it to get this many reviews/favorites/follows, and I sincerely apologize again for the long wait. Here's an extra long update (which I hope will give me enough time to run and hide before you reach the end), so please enjoy :)

This chapter is dedicated to a very special friend of mine, without whom I couldn't have finished writing certain scenes in it. Since it's probably not a good idea to give out your real name, let me just say: DE, thank you. I hope you enjoy this!

Happy New Year! :D

Disclaimer: I do not own Rise of the Guardians or How to Train Your Dragon.

* * *

><p>Sentient

Part 2

"Looks like you have it bad, mate. Yer gonna tell me who's the unlucky sheila?" Aster chortled, smirking smugly as Jack stiffened in shock, flustered and wide-eyed.

Having been caught staring at someone in the crowd across the street, Jack snapped out of his reverie and looked away hurriedly, trying to hide the blush on his face. Unknowingly, he'd been spending the last few minutes of their conversation gazing at Hiccup, watching it interact with the excited children. He had instructed the homundroid to look after them instead of staying with him, having assured it that he could survive by himself for half an hour (_"Relax, Hiccup!_ _Cottontail's no threat, I promise. Just keep an eye on the kids for me, alright?"_).

E. Aster Bunnymund (Jack had yet to figure out what the 'E' stood for, but that didn't stop him from coming up with all sorts of crazy guesses like Egad, Eldorado, Elmo, or just plain Ew) managed the flower shop several blocks away from the daycare center. The Warren was situated opposite a candy store where Jack and the twins would sometimes herd the children over for a sweet treat after lunch. They often had to sneak past Anna's watchful eye first, lest the trio found themselves enduring another lecture about ruining their charges' precious baby teeth. While the kids browsed the shelves and picked out their favorites, Jack usually popped by to visit one of his few friends in the city.

"Come on, you show pony! Or is it a bloke? You know I don't care either way, so spill."

"Shut up, Bunny."

"Don't call me that."

"Kangaâ€" "

"Watch it, Frostbite," the Australian shook his trowel warily. Jack raised his hands in surrender, stepping back to lean against the counter as he watched the other man work. A soft expression washed over his face as he lifted his eyes and turned his head to the side, once again letting his attention stray to his homundroid across the road.

"Quit being a dingo and just go talk to 'em. They won't know how bad you are till you open that mouth of yours," Aster sighed with exasperation, setting a pot of soil on the ground. "You should be fine so long as you don't start chattin' up a homundroid."

Jack whipped his head back and shook it in denial. "Don't be silly, it's not like that!" he laughed uneasily. "And what's wrong with homundroids, anyway?"

"I'm telling you, mate. They're nothing but trouble," Aster groused as he stabbed at the soil to loosen the top layer of dried earth. "There's a reason why homundroids aren't built to be AIs."

"What makes you say that?" Jack frowned. He didn't like where this conversation was going, and suddenly he was glad Hiccup wasn't around to hear it.

"You never know what those bloody machines can do. Ever heard of

Sentients?"

Jack tensed, noticing the way Aster practically spat out the word. "Yeah, from North," he answered carefully, eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What about them?"

"They're dangerous, that's what. It's bad enough we have homundroids making people into lazy bludgers, but Sentients? Mate, reason why we don't let them think is because they'll turn on us if we do."

"Pfft, you watch too many movies," Jack scoffed and flicked a hand dismissively. "Besides, Hiccup wouldn't do that. I trust him â€""

"See what yer doing? Yer calling it 'him' now, like it's human. You've gotten attached Frostbite, and that's another problem." Aster pointed a gloved finger at him, oblivious to the way Jack's jaw clenched slightly. "I reckon you've heard about the abuse. I can tell you it gets worse."

Jack's fingernails ground into his palms and he took a deep breath to calm himself down, trying not to let his growing indignation show. "How?" he snapped with a little more bite than intended.

Aster removed his gloves and stood up to grab a broom sitting in the corner. "You know how many people come into my shop to buy flowers for their machines?" he asked, sweeping the area clean. "It's like watching a soap opera. They fall in love with something that can't return their affections, and then comes all the heartbreak and drama. Throw in those bloody Sentients and everything gets turned upside down. Instead of homundroid abuse, we get reports of assault when people get jumped by 'em! Trust me, there's no hope for love between man and machine. It's a tragedy just waitin' to happen," he concluded with a sigh.

Jack's unusual silence was unnerving and Aster turned around, noticing that the other man wasn't looking too good. He had a white-knuckled death grip on the counter, as though to prevent himself from falling over.

"Mate, you alright?" Aster asked in concern, furrowing his eyebrows at the strange behavior.

Jack flinched and jumped slightly before clearing his throat to speak. "Yeah! Yeah, I'm fine. Just uh â€" have a lot on my mind right now. I mean, wow â€" I never really thought about these things," he babbled, forcing a smile on his face. "And it's not like there's anything going on between Hiccup and me," he hastened to assure the other. "I mean, I know he's just a machine, and all we do is talk and joke around â€""

"What do you mean 'talk'?" Aster interrupted, frowning suspiciously. "Homundroids can't respond unless their owners ask them questions or they're clarifying orders. It's not natural, and you can't hold conversations with them, not unlessâ€!" he trailed off as his eyes widened with realization.

"NO!" Jack suddenly yelled, surprising them both. Mentally berating himself for the outburst, he cringed and shook his head, chuckling nervously. "Ahaha, did I say 'talk'? It's just a figure of speech

really, you know what I mean? I tend to ramble a lot and Hiccup's a good listener. I'm not saying he talks back or anything."

"If you say soâ€|" Aster seemed reluctant to let the issue go, but he dropped it anyway, much to Jack's relief.

Beating a hasty retreat, Jack started to back away towards the door. "Well, I'd better get back before Ruff and Tuff let the kids empty out the store," he said, still somewhat jittery.

And he was gone before Aster could reply.

* * *

><p>This is so messed upâ€|

Jack sighed, running a hand through his hair as he sank into the sofa and threw his head back. He was still shaken by the conversation he had with Aster. The other man had been frighteningly accurate in digging up some painful truths Jack had discovered on his own and tried to bury.

When I bought Hiccup, I didn't want a slave. I wanted a friend, an equalâ€|

Aster had said that homundroids couldn't talk in the normal sense, which meant that they couldn't initiate conversations or give opinions. But Hiccup had broken all those rules ever since Jack had managed to tear down its proverbial firewalls. Did that mean Hiccup was a Sentient? And even so, why did he violently deny it when Aster seemed to have caught on to the same idea?

Jack knew he was harboring feelings for his homundroid. Hiccup had served him faithfully ever since he had purchased it from North's workshop more than a year ago. Over the time they had spent together, he had grown fond of its witty and sarcastic personality, how it bantered with him and made him laugh, the care and comfort it gave him when he fell ill or was simply feeling blue, the slightly awkward way it played with the children at the daycare, and all the other little things that made the homundroid â€“ dare he say it â€“ his Hiccup.

There were times he wondered if his previous years of loneliness had gotten to him so badly that he had started to pretend Hiccup was alive. After the skiing accident that had claimed his family's lives, he had moved to the city for a fresh start and lived by himself for almost a decade. He had friends from his hometown and several new ones in the city, but they were few and far between. It was possible that he had been craving companionship so desperately that he saw things that weren't really there, and that Hiccup responded to him only because it was programmed to, not because it reciprocated his affections or anything.

For some reason, the thought produced a tight stab of pain in his chest.

Maybe that was why he was trying to hide from the truth. Maybe it was because he didn't want to face the fact that he was falling for something that couldn't love him back. After all, Hiccup was nothing more than a machine and the only reason he started referring to it as

'him' was due to its realistic appearance.

But there had been subtle signs that indicated otherwise, and Jack thought back to when he had first activated his homundroid. Hiccup had slapped its hands over its mouth in embarrassment when he had accidentally messed up its settings, unintentionally giving it its namesake. Then it had hesitated on its first day in the center, unsure of how the children would react to it. And the time it had lavished him with careful attention when he had been stricken with a high fever. The tenderness with which it cradled him in its arms when the heater had broken downâ€”

And as Jack sifted through his memories more and more, actively seeking out instances where Hiccup had anticipated his needs and acted on its own without his direct orders, he started to realize the amount of distinctly and instinctively human things the homundroid had done â€”

"Jack?"

Snapping out of his trance, he glanced up to see Hiccup looking at him with a worried frown. Now that he thought about it, normal homundroids always wore a fixed blank look on their faces, but Hiccup had the ability to exhibit different facial expressions depending on the situation. There were exasperated eye rolls when he cracked another one of his lame jokes, triumphant smirks when it managed to beat him in a video game, genuine smiles when it played with the children â€”

"Is everything alright?" Hiccup asked. "Sensors indicate that your heart rate is elevated and â€”"

"You're a Sentient," Jack blurted out before he could stop himself, immediately regretting it when he noticed the way Hiccup seemed to recoil and tense with fear. His mind was spinning with the revelation and he was slightly dazed with shock, but Hiccup's reaction to his discovery did not escape his attention. "N-not that there's anything wrong with that!" he quickly added. "I-I mean, it just means you're different, you're not just a pile of metal and wires put together, and that's nothing to be ashamed of."

Hiccup nodded stiffly to convey its understanding, but Jack could tell from its guarded expression that it was still uncomfortable discussing the issue. The homundroid had neither confirmed nor denied his suspicions, but Jack decided to let it go for now, unwilling to push Hiccup into giving him a definite answer. He could be wrong, but if Hiccup really was a Sentient, why was it so reluctant to admit it? It looked as if it was expecting him to throw a fit and send it to the junkyard or â€”

Jack nearly slapped himself when he realized he had just answered his own question. Hiccup had been abandoned by its previous owner, and chances were it was because it had acted out of line. He remembered the way the homundroid had held itself back during its first few weeks, speaking only when spoken to. It had clearly been hiding its own personality in fear of being abandoned again, and it probably only started to relax and reveal its true nature after Jack's encouragement assured it that he wanted it to respond to him.

A grin crept its way onto Jack's face as he started to feel giddy

with excitement. Quickly bidding Hiccup goodnight, he practically skipped back to his room, his chest threatening to burst with hope. There was a chanceâ€¢ _They_ had a chanceâ€¢ But even though he wasn't a hundred percent sure, it could wait.

They had plenty of time to talk â€“ yes, _talk_ â€“ about it another day.

* * *

><p>Not two weeks later, it was again Friday evening when Jack answered the knocking on his front door to an odd looking pair of men.</p>

The taller of the two had an unnaturally ashen skin tone and was dressed in a sleek business suit as dark as his slicked back hair, whereas his associate was a stockier redhead with a brutish demeanor and a slightly crazed look in his eyes. They introduced themselves as Mr. Black and Mr. Zerkr respectively, and the ID cards clipped onto their breast pockets indicated that they were representatives from Nightlight Industries, a major company known worldwide as one of the leading manufacturers of homundroids.

According to Mr. Black, every one of their products had a built-in monitoring system which would automatically switch on every few years. When that happened, the company would receive an alert and they would send down a couple of their employees to locate the homundroid for a free checkup.

"That's very kind of you, and I appreciate the fact that you came all the way just to see Hiccup, but I can assure you that he's in good shape," Jack explained, looking apologetic. "I take him to the shop once a month, and the owner does good work tuning him."

"Well, that just makes our job easier then," Mr. Black smiled widely, making a hidden hand gesture behind his back towards his colleague. "If you would allow me to do a short survey while my associate performs a quick inspection, we'll be on our way in no time."

Jack couldn't put a finger on why he was feeling so uneasy around the two men, but he saw no harm in granting their request. After all, the sooner they were done, the sooner they would leave. Stepping back to allow them into the apartment, he called Hiccup into the living room. His brow furrowed when it moved to stand next to him with its face completely blank and expressionless, and he missed the way the two men's attention immediately zeroed in on his homundroid.

"Step right here please," Mr. Zerkr said, gesturing to the empty spot in front of him.

Hiccup didn't move.

"Go on, Hiccup. Stand over there," Jack encouraged, getting more and more confused by the minute about the homundroid's strange behavior. He watched in puzzlement as Hiccup walked mechanically towards the other man and stood stiffly at the designated spot.

"Let's begin, shall we?" Mr. Black cut in smoothly, stepping between them to block Hiccup from Jack's view. "How satisfied are you with your homundroid's services?"

"Uh, very â€“ very well."

"That's good to hear. Did it cost you a lot of money to purchase it from the store?"

"Not at all. The owner gave me a discount since he was about to recycle him."

"I see," Mr. Black nodded as he took down notes on his tablet. "Friendship is a pretty cheap commodity nowadays," he murmured loudly, seemingly to himself.

Jack frowned. "Excuse me?"

"That is why you bought a homundroid, is it not?" he smiled lightly at Jack. "I say, you must have been really desperate to resort to buying a friend for yourself. Still, I commend you for being able to get it at a discounted price."

What the hell? Who does he think he is? Jack bristled with indignation, and yet something in him cringed at the ugly truth hidden beneath the man's words. Hearing him say it out loud was like rubbing salt on an open wound. He glanced towards Hiccup, hoping that the homundroid would step in with a word or two.

But to his horror, he saw Mr. Zerkr petting Hiccup's body heavily, from stroking its wings and rubbing its chest to combing his fingers through its hair and tracing them down its jaw. His hands wound around its waist and reached behind, cupping its backside and squeezing slightly. The worst part was that his fondling produced absolutely no reaction from the homundroid, who remained standing perfectly still with a blank face.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" Jack yelled at him and took a step forward, clenching his fists when Mr. Black intercepted him and moved between them again.

"You'll have to pardon Mr. Zerkr's methods," Mr. Black explained patiently. "He's new on the job, and he tends to take a moreâ€¢ hands-on approach when it comes to assessing structural integrity. Rest assured, he knows what he's doing. Now, shall we continue?"

Gritting his teeth in frustration, Jack forced himself to back off and calm down. "Fine," he nodded tersely, his voice clipped.

Mr. Black smirked at him, showing off the sharpened teeth behind his lips. "Well then, do you foresee yourself purchasing another homundroid anytime in the near future?"

"No," Jack responded firmly. "Hiccup's all I ever need and I have no intention of replacing him."

"My my, such dedication. I'm sure your homundroid must feel the same way."

Grinning madly at his cue, Mr. Zerkr forcefully grabbed Hiccup's chin and looked it in the eye, making sure that Jack could see and hear him. "Looks like your master really likes you. But what about you? Do

you want to stay with him?"

Something in Jack's chest shriveled with pain when again, his homundroid didn't respond. His face flushed with anger and he felt moisture gathering in his eyes, but he fought to keep his composure in front of them even when he could practically hear his heart shattering into pieces.

"Why would he?" Mr. Black snorted and turned to face his colleague. "You know people like him only use their homundroids for sex, right?"

"H-how dare you!" Jack spluttered, outraged. "Just what are you insinuating?"

"Should've guessed from the customization. Only pedophiles have the balls to show off by adding their kinks to their toys," Mr. Zerkr replied easily, blatantly ignoring Jack's protests. "I bet he likes to play dress up with the kids at the daycare to indulge in his sick fantasies during work." The red-haired man slid his hands over Hiccup's thighs, caressing gently before snaking between them â€"

And Jack saw red.

"I've had enough of this," he seethed. "Get out, both of you."

Mr. Black and Mr. Zerkr exchanged subtle glances. The taller man nodded at his partner and they started to make their way out, but not before pausing momentarily at the doorway.

"Just a parting query, if you will," Mr. Black said, smiling politely as though the events in the past hour never took place. "Your homundroid wouldn't happen to be a Sentient, would it?"

Jack thought back to the way Hiccup remained stoic and silent throughout, behaving for all intents and purposes like a regular homundroid, and something in him snapped when he remembered how it did absolutely nothing and allowed the two men to insult him freely.

"No," he snarled bitterly before slamming the door in their faces. He waited for the chime of the elevator signaling their departure before rounding on his homundroid. "What the hell was that?" he hissed angrily, narrowing his eyes at it.

"What do you mean?" Hiccup asked in confusion.

"What do I â€" How could you â€" You just stood there while that creep â€"!" Jack cut himself off, trying to quell his growing rage at the thought of the other man running his dirty hands all over Hiccup. He didn't know where the sudden possessive streak was coming from, but honestly he couldn't care less at the moment.

"I didn't do anything because I had a bad feeling about â€""

"Oh, now you feel something?" he sneered, taking somewhat sadistic pleasure at seeing his homundroid shrink back in fear. "And I can't believe you let them get away with saying all those things about me! I thought you were my friend!"

"I'm sorry!" Hiccup yelled back. "I didn't think it would affect you like this! I don't understand â€"

"That's exactly my point!" Jack screamed. "You'll never understand because _you're just a machine!"

The apartment was abruptly blanketed in tense silence, so much so that Jack's words practically echoed in the stillness. The man was shaking with fury, clenching his fists tightly at his sides and panting harshly, trying to catch his breath after his violent outburst. Across from him, Hiccup's entire frame sagged with defeat as its wings drooped low, crestfallen.

"I'm not," it whispered dejectedly. "I'm different. You said it yourself, and you promised me it was okay, that it was nothing to be ashamed of."

"Then why didn't you answer them when they asked if you wanted to stay?" Jack demanded, glaring at the homundroid.

"I couldn't. You didn't tell me to."

"What? Since when do I have to tell you to answer?"

"You don't. Not sinceâ€|" Hiccup sighed and wrapped its arms around itself. "I didn't like them," it admitted, shuddering slightly as it jerked its head towards the front door. "They reminded me of my previous masters. I thought something bad would happen if I stepped out of line. That's why I tried to hide when you first bought me. I didn't want you to throw me away like they did because I wasn't like the other homundroids," it glanced at him sadly, begging him to understand. "I was afraid to trust you at first, but then you encouraged me to talk back. You wanted _me to be your friend, you â€" You called me 'amazing' when you first activated me, and that made me so happyâ€|"

But Jack remained unmoved, too blinded by his anger to see reason. "That doesn't answer my question," he scowled, his face hardening with a frown.

Hiccup flinched. "I'm sorâ€"

"Save it. I don't want to hear your excuses. I should've known I couldn't count on you to defend me."

"Jack, please! Just listen to me â€"

"We're done here," Jack spat before turning around and stalking back to his room.

The door slammed shut with finality, leaving Hiccup standing alone.

* * *

><p>"Well that was a complete waste of time," Mr. Zerkr scowled, throwing himself into the backseat of the car. "That homundroid was pretty cute though," he added as an afterthought, grinning darkly.</p>

"Yes, you sure did a good job riling up his owner. Too bad it was a false alarm. I was so sure!" Mr. Black muttered in disappointment, sliding in next to the red-haired man before gesturing at their driver to hit the road.

"How do you know that Hiccup isn't a Sentient?"

"Normal homundroids can only react when their masters are in physical danger. They are constantly monitoring their surroundings and assessing imminent threats, but Sentients take this one step further," Mr. Black explained. "They can interpret subtle cues like body language and heart rate, and this is what distinguishes them from normal homundroids. If their masters are under emotional stress, they will intervene accordingly. It's what makes them as their name implies "Sentient."

"So you were hoping to get a reaction by insulting Frost?"

"If what Hiccup's previous owner said when he filed a report complaining about its 'backtalk' defect was true, yes."

"Then why did you give me the signal to start rubbing my hands all over it? Not that I'm complaining, of course."

"Frost kept referring to it as 'him', which led me to suspect that he may have gotten attached to his homundroid. With verbal assault on my side and physical exploration on yours, one of them was bound to crack. Unfortunately, it seems that our efforts were fruitless."

Mr. Zerkr cackled maniacally. "So since Hiccup's just another one of those machines, mind sparing me few hands to snag it? I wouldn't mind having a piece of that," he licked his lips lustfully.

"It might break the pattern and throw the authorities off our trail, but we've attracted enough attention as it is," Mr. Black shook his head firmly, earning a huff of annoyance from the other man. "We are only hunting down the Sentients. Remember that, Dagur. The board is very strict with our resources and we cannot afford to compromise our study with your careless attitude."

"Come on, Pitch. How about after you're done with your experiments?"

"If they're still functioning, then you may do as you please," he smirked. "After all, we all know how much you love to hear them scream."

* * *

><p>The next two days went by in absolute silence. It felt almost like the time before Jack had bought Hiccup, except for the fact that there was palpable tension in the air instead of permeating emptiness.</p>

Jack stayed cooped up in his room brooding while his homundroid remained outside and kept its distance, making itself scarce to give him space. Hiccup had long learned his owner's weekend routine and proceeded as per normal, dutifully sitting (this time, alone) in front of the gaming console for several hours before heading to the

kitchen to prepare Jack's meals. The man had left his door unlocked during his self-imposed period of solitude, so Hiccup was able to enter and exit swiftly without hearing the thanks it knew it would not receive.

When Monday morning finally rolled around, Jack told Hiccup to stay home.

"And that's an order," he snapped testily, still on edge from their fight three days ago.

But Hiccup shook its head in refusal. "Since you seem so adamant that I'm nothing but a machine, I must obey my core programming and remain close to you."

"Oh yeah?" Jack sneered, oblivious to the way Hiccup's words strained with the effort to sound emotionless. "Since you insist you're so different, you should be able to override your stupid code and just leave me alone!"

Storming out of the apartment, Jack barely heard the despondent whisper of "yes, master" slipping past the homundroid's lips before slamming the front door shut behind him. There was a little voice in his head that remarked on how Hiccup was acting so similar to the way it did when he had first bought it, but while some part of him started to feel guilty for mocking the homundroid and throwing its words back at its face, he was too stubborn to apologize and too angry to care anymore.

* * *

><p>"Where's Hiccup?" Jamie asked, sending Jack a curious look from where he was playing with Claude and Caleb next to him. Jack tensed at the question, but he quickly forced a smile on his face as he told the boy that the homundroid wasn't feeling well that morning, so he had told it to stay home.</p>

"Hiccup's sick?" Gil tugged at Jack's shirt in worry. "I read in a book that dragons like fish. Should we bring him some to make him feel better?"

"I'm sure he just needs some rest and then he'll be good as new!" Pippa chirped, busy racing against Cassandra's toy unicorn with her stuffed dolphin.

Sean snorted and puffed his chest out. "My dad said that rest is for the weak!" he declared. "When I grow up, I'm getting a homundroid just like Hiccup, but even better! He's gonna have red wings and horns on his head, and he can light himself on fire so no one can hurt him!"

Anna chuckled at the boy's enthusiasm. "But that also means you can't touch him or you'll get burned."

"Oh, uhâ€!" Sean faltered slightly at the forgotten detail, but he was not deterred and put his hands together in the shape of a gun. "Then he'll have big weapons that can go like â€""

A gunshot echoed from outside, shocking everyone into silence.

"W-wow, those were some realistic sound effects," Monty laughed nervously and backed away from Sean.

"But I didn't â€“"

Three more gunshots rang out, followed by panicked screaming and the shrill blare of the fire alarm.

"Hiccup!" Jack called out in reflex, turning around to tell it to get the children to safety, only to realize too late that he had ordered the homundroid not to follow him that day.

"What's going on out there?" Rhonda reached for the door and pulled it open, just in time to be ambushed with a gun pointing directly at her chest.

"Ruff!" Thomas cried out for his twin, but he could do nothing as the gunman grabbed her and pressed the barrel of his weapon against her temple.

"No one move or I'll shoot!"

Everybody froze as the lights outside suddenly dimmed, and the gunman turned his head towards the alarmed shouting coming from the darkened hallway, lowering the gun in confusion. Rhonda took advantage of his distraction to elbow him hard in the guts, causing him to shove her forward into her brother's arms before aiming his gun at them with a pained but angry snarl.

Jamie screamed, prompting the gunman to swing his weapon towards him, and Jack immediately jumped in front of the boy and braced himself for the pain â€“

Then something wrapped around the gunman's legs and yanked.

Jack barely registered a black blur in the shadows of the corridor before the gunman was pulled off his feet and dragged backwards, shouting in a mix of surprise and fear as his hands frantically scrabbled for purchase on the floor, his dropped gun forgotten. The children cowered around their caretakers as more gunshots erupted outside before everything suddenly went quiet.

After a moment of tense silence, Hiccup stepped through the doorway, looking worse for wear with several bullet holes punched through its wings and no few dents littering its body. Jack nearly sobbed with relief at the sight of his homundroid, but despite its injuries, some part of him felt pretty intimidated by its appearance. Its lengthened claws and spread out wings made it look feral and dangerous, and he had never seen this side of Hiccup before.

"The east entrance has been secured. Take the hallway behind the lobby and exit the premises," it instructed.

Anna wasted no time in gathering the children together and herding them towards the door. Some of them had started to cry and wail in fear, and she set aside her own panic to assure them that everything was going to be okay, that Hiccup was there to protect them now. As the group evacuated the room, Jack noticed that Hiccup kept its wings hanging low, blocking the children's view of the hallway behind it.

Red liquid dripped down its claws, and Jack struggled to suppress a shudder.

"Where did all these people come from?" Thomas grunted, reaching down to pick up Gil and Monty. The poor boys were petrified to the spot, so he had to carry them out.

"The tattoo!" Rhonda gasped in realization as she recalled the black ink marking the gunman's beefy arms. "They're part of that terrorist cell that appeared in the news several months back!"

"You mean the one where their leader was sighted near the city?"

She nodded. "I think his name's Alvin or something. I don't know a lot about him, so I have no idea why he'd suddenly attack a daycare center out of the blue."

Hiccup abruptly stiffened and turned around.

"What? What is it?" Jack asked worriedly.

"Incoming hostile party detected. Sensors are registering several explosives in the vicinity." The homundroid looked back at Jack. "You must hurry. I will hold them off."

"Jack, come on!" Thomas yelled at him as he caught up with Anna. Rhonda grabbed Jack's hand and pulled him over to take up the rear end of the group.

Although he knew there was nothing he could do to help Hiccup, Jack couldn't help but leave reluctantly. He told himself that he would only get in the way if he tried anything reckless, not to mention Hiccup could take care of itself. The children were his priority at the moment and he could not afford to endanger them any further, but he was scared for Hiccup too. The homundroid wasn't exactly bulletproof, and one (un)lucky shot through its CPU would be enough to shut it down for good.

He's not alive he's just a machine, Jack reminded himself, but even his conviction was shaky. He didn't understand why he was getting so worked up over it. When it came down to choosing between a living being and a robot, everyone knew what the logical answer was. There was no reason for him to feel as conflicted as he did, and he had to focus on ensuring that everyone got out safely.

They were almost at the end of the hallway when an explosion rocked the building, and Jack tore his hand out of Rhonda's as he screeched to a stop and turned around.

"What are you doing?" she shrieked, reaching out to pull him away.

Jack looked back and noticed that it was only the two of them left. Anna and Thomas had managed to evacuate the children to safety, so he had nothing left to lose.

"Go! I'll be fine!" he promised, pushing her towards the open door before spinning on his heel and sprinting back into the building. It occurred to him that he was risking his life to save a machine (_he's so much more than that_, some part of him whispered), but Hiccup was

still inside and he was not about to just leave it there so easily.

_Please be okay please be okay please be okay _

"Hiccup!" he yelled, swerving into the next corridor just in time to see his homundroid peeling itself out from a sizable hole in the wall. It turned around at the sound of its name and before Jack could even blink, Hiccup was looming over him and pushing him back the way he had come.

"Maximum danger level detected. Evacuate the building immediately," it warned, and something inside Jack twisted with guilt at the monotonous tone of the words coming out of the homundroid's mouth.

But there was no time to dwell on their fight at the moment. He clamped down on Hiccup's arm and started to pull it along with him. "Not without you. We can still _"

"There it is!"

Jack gasped when he was roughly shoved through a door and into an empty room. He let out an involuntary cry of pain as Hiccup pressed him into the ground, covering his body with its own while bullets whizzed past them in the hallway.

"Get out while I take care of them," Hiccup growled into his ear before pushing off and launching itself at the approaching group of gunmen.

Wheezing for breath, Jack remained on the floor for a few moments before struggling to his feet. His instincts were screaming at him to run and save himself, but some stubborn part of him still refused to abandon Hiccup despite the imminent danger. There was the sound of another distant explosion outside and he found himself unable to move, paralyzed with fear. It wasn't until the homundroid appeared in the doorway again did he manage to regain his bearings somewhat.

"What the hell are you still doing here, you idiot?!" Hiccup snarled, reaching forward to grab Jack by the shoulders and haul him out. Wincing as its claws dug through his shirt and into his skin, Jack faintly registered the reddish coat of fresh blood on the black scales, and it took everything to force himself not to look back at the bodies of the gunmen behind them.

"I'm not leaving without you," he managed to choke out, shaking his head defiantly as Hiccup dragged him away from the sealed exit. The earlier explosion had collapsed the ceiling above it and blocked the way out, and the direness of the situation had caused the homundroid to drop its emotionless act, allowing Jack to realize just how much Hiccup was worried about his safety. "Hiccup, I'm sorry!"

"Not now. I need to get you out of here before _"

Hiccup froze.

It turned to face Jack with the most frightened expression the man had ever seen on its face, and then it lunged forward and crushed him

in a tight embrace as the world lit up around them.

* * *

><p>Darkness.</p>

That was the first thing Jack woke up to, even though it was hard to tell if his eyes were closed or not.

It was dark, it was cold, and it was deathly silent save for his ragged breaths echoing in the stillness.

A spike of panic shot through him when he realized he couldn't move, and as he squirmed to get free, he felt something pinning his arms to his sides and trapping his legs together. There was a hand at the back of his head pressing his face into a hard leathery surface, making it hard to breathe, and it was the scaly texture of the limbs holding him in place that reminded him where he was.

"H-Hiccup?" he rasped out, coughing when he accidentally inhaled a mouthful of dust as he struggled to force air into his lungs.

"Hiccup, let go. I can't breathe."

There was no answer from the homundroid.

"Hiccup, please! You're hurting me!" he begged, twisting about to avoid getting smothered by its chest. Jack winced as every nerve in his body flared with pain under Hiccup's unrelenting grip, and it was only when he was forced to stay still did something finally click in his mind.

It was quiet.

There was no sound other than his gasps for breath and the pounding of his heart beating wildly in his chest. Even though the way Hiccup was cradling him felt like the time he had shared his bed with it, he couldn't hear the familiar hum of machinery that had soothed him to sleep when his head was tucked under its chin, and there was no warmth coming from the arms that were wound securely around him. Belatedly, it hit him that something was wrong. Hiccup was never cold, not even when it powered down to conserve energy at night.

"Hiccup?"

Jack began to writhe with renewed desperation when his homundroid failed to respond.

"Hiccup, say something!"

Instead of the voice he was frantically aching to hear, his ears picked up the faint barking of dogs in the distance. He squeezed his eyes shut and blinked as light suddenly flooded his senses.

"Over here! We've found him!"

The protective shell around them was pried open and Jack realized that Hiccup had used its wings to cocoon him, forming a shield against the falling debris. He winced at the sight of the dented appendages riddled with bullet holes and when he looked down, he saw

that Hiccup had wrapped its tail tightly around his legs. Their rescuers had to use a crowbar to release Jack from his homundroid's vice grip on him, leaving more scratches and dents on its limbs, but it had been the only other alternative given that he had vehemently protested against severing them completely.

Free at last, Jack was handed over to a team of paramedics who stepped forward and prepared to load him into an ambulance, but something tightened in his chest when he realized that they were taking him away from Hiccup, who for some reason wasn't following behind them. In a desperate burst of energy, he shook off the hands steadyng him and turned around to make sure it was okay â€"

And then his eyes landed on the homundroid's face.

Jack wouldn't remember it later, but at that moment he started to thrash violently in the paramedics' grip, screaming for Hiccup. Someone yelled something about sedation and restraints, but Jack was already too far gone to pay any attention to it. He struggled like a caged wild animal against the firm hands holding him back from rushing to the homundroid's side, unaware that his actions were severely aggravating his wounds. The prick of a needle at the region near his neck was lost to him, but he could feel his movements slowing down. Darkness crept into the edges of his blurring vision and he fought to stay awake, inevitably losing the battle as the sedative coursed through his veins.

Slumping ungracefully against the arms supporting him, Jack started to slip into oblivion, the last image seared into his memory being the sight of Hiccup's eyes â€" open, but as black and hollow as the paws that had shielded him in a protective embrace.

Lifeless.

Just like the machine Jack said it was.

4. Epilogue

Author's Note: I am so, so sorry for the last chapter. Please take this final installment as a peace offering.

Disclaimer: I do not own Rise of the Guardians or How to Train Your Dragon.

* * *

><p>Sentient

Epilogue

_â€" confirmed that Alvin has been taken into custody. Authorities were able to trace the signal from the detonation of the master bomb to locate his hideout, and it is reported that all the terrorists under his leadership involved in the attack were killed when the building collapsed. The number of civilian casualties â€" _

North stood at the doorway, watching as Phillip silently padded into the room and draped a blanket over Jack's shoulders. The man was slumped over the table, resting his head on his arms as he slept.

Despite having been released from the hospital less than two weeks ago, Jack had insisted on helping him with Hiccup's repairs and North didn't have the heart to turn him down when he had practically begged him to save his homundroid. Besides, it was a good chance to see how well his newest employee could manage on his own.

"Go home, Phil. I will close up," North said, earning an affirmative grunt in response as Phillip left the room.

This wasn't the first time Jack had fallen asleep in the workshop. He practically spent every waking moment there, and while his concerned colleagues stopped by frequently to force food into him and make him return home for a proper night's rest, he would always be back early the next morning without fail, well before opening hours. Phillip had nearly mistaken him for a homeless person sleeping on the doorstep on his first day at work.

Sighing in resignation, North decided to let Jack spend the night. He reached for the remote control to switch off the television in the corner.

_ "â€" in a startling scandal that has left the public outraged. Nightlight Industries has been accused of the rash of stolen homundroids in the past year, and it is speculated that they were targeting Sentients as part of an illegal study. Authorities have launched an investigation on the company and â€""_

* * *

><p>To everyone's surprise, it was Aster who had retrieved Hiccup after the paramedics had sedated Jack and taken him away. The Australian had forced his way through the crowd and prevented the cleanup crew from scrapping the homundroid's body, claiming that he knew someone who could fix it and return it to its owner. North's suspicions were confirmed when Aster came to him, and he admitted that he had felt bad for what happened and wanted to help any way he could.</p>

In the meantime, Jack spent four restless days in the hospital. He had a mild concussion, a few cracked ribs courtesy of his homundroid's tight grip on him, several bruises, and suffered from slight oxygen deprivation (he had very nearly been smothered by Hiccup's chest). When he was finally discharged and found out what Aster had done, it took five minutes to pry him off the other man and another ten to get him to stop crying and blubbering his thanks.

But recovering Hiccup's body was only the beginning. The homundroid had sustained major damage: one tailfin had been ripped clean off, its left leg was crushed beyond repair and had to be replaced, multiple bullet wounds littered its body and wings, and its CPU had taken direct blunt force trauma. North warned Jack that Hiccup was an old model and finding parts for it would be difficult, but Jack refused to give up without a fight and swore that he would fix it, with or without North's help.

"I will do my best," North promised solemnly. "But its core is badly damaged, and even if it wakes up, it may not be your Hiccup anymore."

Nevertheless, Jack clung to a thin thread of hope like a lifeline,

stubbornly refusing to believe that his homundroid was gone just like that. There was no way he would let the odds beat him so easily, and he tried to convince himself that everything would work out in the end. North would save Hiccup and then he could finally apologize, and even if Hiccup never forgave him, at least it would be alive.

(Except that Hiccup wasn't "You're just a machine!" he screamed and the words echoed in his mind like a broken record, haunting his nightmares for months to come.)

Jack was a fast learner and he did everything from fetching North his tools to helping him with the simpler repair work. A mixture of regret, guilt and determination drove him onwards, and he had lost count of the number of times Phil had to step in to bandage his fingers, blistered and bleeding from all the intricate work he was not used to (he had ignored the pain, too numb to even care about his own well-being anymore). While part of him knew there was only so much he could do and he should just leave things to North, all it took was one look at Hiccup's injuries to remind him that it was all his fault, that Hiccup was gone because of him, and it was enough to renew his vigor and redouble his efforts.

(His dream-self turned away from the only person "You're just a machine!" that had ever stood by him, and Jack watched in horror as Hiccup literally crumbled into pieces before his eyes and started to burn until there was nothing left but a smoking pile of melted scrap metal.)

The first time he saw Hiccup (or what remained of it) after the attack, he had nearly broken down at the sight of the hollow and vacant expression on its face. North kept a close watch on him that day, but Jack found it slightly more bearable to work on the homundroid after closing its empty eyes and pretending it was asleep (not dead, never dead, because how could something that was never alive to begin with "You're just a machine!" _be dead?).

* * *

><p>Four months later, Hiccup's body was almost as good as new. North had done his best as promised, and now there wasn't a single scratch or dent on the restored homundroid. It could even have been easily mistaken for a brand new model. But Hiccup slept on, and while they spent days trying to figure out why, even North was stumped.</p>

One Friday evening saw Jack remaining behind to tinker with Hiccup's settings after North had stepped out for the day. He felt a strange sense of nostalgia as he fiddled with the wires and switches. It was what had led to Hiccup earning its name after all, and Jack chuckled absently at the memory. He pressed the button at the nape of its neck, crossed his fingers for the umpteenth time, and sighed in disappointment when the homundroid failed to activate (again).

I'm sorry for everythingâ€| Please don't leave me like thisâ€|

Rolling his shoulders and cracking his knuckles, Jack tried once more. He placed Hiccup upright on its feet in the middle of the room and checked the homundroid carefully for anything he might have missed, consulting the manual frequently to ensure that everything

was where it was supposed to be. Nothing was out of place, but Hiccup's systems still refused to reboot.

I don't care if you hate me for the rest of my lifeâ€| Just wake upâ€| Pleaseâ€|

Hours passed with no results. Sagging with exhaustion, Jack leaned against the homundroid and draped his arms over its shoulders in a one-sided hug, letting his head fall onto its chest with a loud _thunk_.

Almost immediately, the room was filled with the hum of machinery as Jack felt the surface beneath his forehead vibrate and warm up. He jumped back with a gasp, holding his breath as he watched familiar green eyes slide open.

"Hiccup! You're okay!" he exclaimed in relief.

"Vocal imprint completed."

Jack froze at the monotonous tone of the words, staring at Hiccup's blank face in shock as the tool in his hand clattered to the floor.

"Would you like to change your default designation?"

"Noâ€|" he whispered, horrified. "No NO!"

"Please input my name."

"Hiccup!" Jack grabbed its shoulders and shook it frantically. _This can't be happening! It has to be a nightmare, it just has to! I'm probably still sleeping on North's table and I need to WAKE UP NOW!_ He pinched his arm hard for good measure, but the pain failed to compare to the weight of reality crashing down on him when nothing changed. Months ago, he hadn't understood when North warned him that there was a chance the homundroid would not be the same, but now he did.

"Name registration completed. Master, what is your command?"

"Hiccup, it's me! It's Jack! Don't you remember?"

The homundroid paused and stared at him intently. Jack dared to let himself hope as he tentatively reached out to cup its cheeks with shaking hands. "Hiccup?" he whispered, searching its forest green optics for any shred of recognition. _Please please pleaseâ€|_

"I do not understand. Master, what is your command?"

Jack's heart stopped.

His face crumpled with devastation as hot tears began to well up in his eyes. "J-justâ€| Just stop talking for a moment," he choked out, not wasting any time before throwing himself at the homundroid, squeezing it in a tight embrace. "Please Hic," he whimpered, his breath hitching as he sobbed. "Please come back to meâ€|"

In a last ditch effort, Jack abruptly crushed his lips against

Hiccup's in a desperate kiss. He poured every ounce of emotion he could into it, almost as if he could will them back into the homundroid, trying to convey just how sorry he was for hurting it, how badly he wanted his snarky and sarcastic companion back, how much he loved his Hiccup.

But as much as its lips were warm and smooth, they were also unmoving and unresponsive. Jack pulled back and sighed dejectedly at the expressionless face staring back at him. Heartbroken, he moved to step away â€"

Only to find that he could not.

Before he could register that there were arms around his waist keeping him in place, Hiccup blinked once and quickly released him, returning its hands to the side. "Sorry, I â€“" it caught itself and swiftly clamped its mouth shut, stiffening slightly.

"No, it's okayâ€|" Jack sniffed, looking away. "There's no need to â€“"

Apologize.

Hiccup was apologizing.

Jack's eyes widened with realization and he whipped his head back to gape at his homundroid, who looked (or was it just him?) fidgety and somewhat uncomfortable under his intense stare.

"You â€“" he stopped, shaking his head and giving Hiccup a small smile. "Thanks for the hug. I needed that," he said sincerely, watching the homundroid carefully for any traces of reaction. It seemed hesitant to respond, but Jack told himself he wasn't imagining the slightly bashful look that crossed its face. He laughed softly as he wiped the remaining tears off his cheeks. "You're amazing," he whispered, gazing fondly at Hiccup.

This time, there was no mistaking the way its eyes shone a little brighter, nor the faint twitch of its lips as it fought to contain a shy smile at the compliment.

And Jack knew.

The homundroid may have forgotten him, but it was still a Sentient. It would learn again with time and they would have another chance to start over, a chance he was determined not to waste. All that mattered was that his Hiccup was somewhere in there, and it was enough to give him a spark of hope. It would take time and he would have to be patient, but it was a price he was willing to pay.

With that in mind, Jack reached out to grasp the homundroid's hand and gently tugged it towards the door.

"Come on. Let's go home."

And Hiccup followed dutifully behind him, its fingers curling over his ever so slightly.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: I hope the epilogue gave you guys some closure, and let me just say how much I appreciate your patience with my slow updates and putting up with my excuses. Thank you so much for reading, and I hope everyone enjoyed the ride. Till next time :)

End
file.